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Constructing the Umayyads

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Introduction

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Although both the Abbasid caliphs of Sunnism and the various Imams of Shi'ism were members of the Prophet Muḥammad's tribe of Hāshim, the descendants of Hāshim's fraternal nephew Umayya dominated the Islamic world for most of its first century and went on to hold power in Spain for another 300 years.¹ The Umayyad clan were said already to have been powerful in pre-Islamic Mecca, and their political success in Islam was swift: the third successor to Muḥammad, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 644–656), was an Umayyad.² Following five years of civil war (*fitna*), the leadership of the Muslim Empire remained in the hands of 'Uthmān's Umayyad relatives, passing first to his second cousin, Mu'āwiya (r.

¹ That is, Muḥammad was said to have been the great-grandson of Hāshim b. 'Abd Manāf, while the Umayyads were said to be descended from Umayya b. 'Abd Shams b. 'Abd Manāf, see, e.g. al-Zubayrī, *Kitāb Nasab Quraysh* ed. Évariste Lévi-Provençal (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1953), pp. 14, 17, 97, 100–1.

² 'Uthmān was the great-grandson of Umayya b. 'Abd Shams b. 'Abd Manāf, and so also a third cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad in the male line; on his mother's side, 'Uthmān was a first cousin of Muḥammad. See, e.g., al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, ed. M. al-Fardūs al-'Aẓm (Damascus: Dār al-Yaqāza al-'Arabīya, 1997–2004), V: 83. For the traditions about the status of the Umayyads and the wider clan of 'Abd Shams at Mecca before Islam, see for example the list of the leading men of Quraysh in the *Sīra*: Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb Sīrat Rasūl Allāh: Das Leben Muhammed's nach Muhammed ibn Ishāk*, ed. Ferdinand Wüstenfeld (Göttingen : Dieterichsche Universitäts-Buchhandlung 1858–60), p.187.

661–680), who relocated the capital to Damascus in post-Roman Syria, and then, after a second civil war, to his first cousin once-removed, ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705; unchallenged 692–705). ‘Abd al-Malik, his progeny and nephews held power down to the Abbasid Revolution of 747–50, which brought about Umayyads’ fall and the rule of their Hashimite Abbasid cousins (r. 750–1258). The Umayyads’ Syrian armies were supplanted by soldiers recruited in the former Sasanian province of Khurasan and the imperial capital was moved to Iraq.³ However, the Umayyad dynasty retained its political role in Spain, where ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mu‘āwīya (r. 756–788) took power. This ‘Abd al-Raḥmān claimed to be the great-grandson of ‘Abd al-Malik. His Spanish Umayyad dynasty ruled as independent emirs, and then, after 924, as caliphs—rivalling the Abbasids of Baghdad and the Fatimids of North Africa and Egypt. The Umayyad dynasty fell in Spain in 1031, almost 400 years after the death of the Prophet.⁴

The five papers on the Umayyads of Syria and Spain in this special edition of *al-Masāq* were all presented at the 2013 Leeds Medieval Congress. Together, they unsettle and challenge current consensus on the Umayyad dynasty, on the Umayyad periods in Syria and Spain, and on the Arabic historiography upon which we depend for much of our evidence for all three. Across the five pieces there is a focus on the contingent and contextual character of the written evidence. In this they reflect of course the broader historiographical currents of the last few decades; positivism has been supplanted by various perspectives that emphasise the social construction of culture and how all historical memory is

³ The best outline of events remains Gerald Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661–750* (London: Croom Helm, 1986; 2nd edition, London: Routledge, 2000).

⁴ See further below, Nicola Clarke, ‘Heirs and spares: elite fathers and their sons in the literary sources of Umayyad Iberia’.

shaped by the present in which it is remembered.⁵ Furthermore (and related to this heightened historiographical awareness), there is a strong emphasis in these articles on perspectives that are partially concealed by the majority of our sources—concealment that has often increased by the biases and interests of modern historians. Many of the early Arabic sources were the products of imperial centres—Baghdad, Samarra and Córdoba—and so themselves construct the centrality of those centres against their ‘peripheries’.⁶ (And even other, more local, sources were in some respects products of the same centre-periphery power relationship.⁷) The sources also tend to privilege other hegemonies, too—notably here, rulers over rebels and men over women.⁸

The first paper, by Harry Munt, ‘Caliphal Imperialism and Ḥijāzī Elites in the Second/Eighth Century,’ issues twin challenges—to the dynastic terms in which early Islamic history is still usually conceived and to the dominant narrative of Umayyad imperial failure. Munt examines relations between the West Arabian province of the Ḥijāz, where both shrine towns of Mecca and Medina were located, and the imperial centre—first Umayyad Syria (661–683 and 692–750)

⁵ The literature here is of course vast. Hayden V. White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987) is a key contribution to this perspective. These trends have made their impact in late antique and medieval history, including Islamic history. See—to give just two recent examples—Thomas Sizgorich, *Violence and Belief in Late Antiquity: Militant Devotion in Christianity and Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Nancy Khalek, *Damascus after the Muslim Conquest: Text and Image in Early Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁶ The Iraqi focus of much early Islamic historiography is often noted, although the picture is complicated: Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. xviii–xx.

⁷ As Robinson puts it, ‘these [provincial] dynasties had a stake in patronizing the cultural patterns first mooted in Iraq, which, as far as learning was concerned, meant patronizing Arabic, Arabic letters or an Arabicized language’, *ibid.*, pp. xviii–xx.

⁸ Again, these concerns are of course part of a broader shift in subjects of historical concern: rebellion and revolt have been a source of interest to Marxist historians for a long time, and feminist and women’s history also now has a long tradition. In Islamic history, two recent contributions on these themes are: Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Kecia Ali, *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010).

and then Abbasid Iraq (after 750). Whereas there was only one major revolt that won substantial Ḥijāzī support during the Syrian Umayyad period—the so-called anti-caliphate of Ibn al-Zubayr (r. 683–692)—there were a series of revolts in the Ḥijāz after the Abbasid Revolution in 750. Three occurred in the 25 years between 762 and 786. As Munt observes, this is part of a pattern across the whole empire: ‘the Umayyad caliphs, at least after the second *fitna*, may actually have done a better job of convincing provincial elites of the imperial rationale than their early ‘Abbāsīd successors’. In the Ḥijāz, the ‘provincial elite’ consisted of Meccans and Medinans, whose ancestors had been present during the founding decades of Islam and had presided over many of the Islamic conquests. They generally benefitted from the imperial project and recognised that their interests lay in supporting the ruling family, to whom, after all, they were closely related. Even in the tumultuous decades after the Abbasid revolution, only one of the three major Ḥijāzī revolts garnered substantial support. Indeed, one could almost suggest—although Munt does not explicitly push his argument this far—that from the perspective of imperial power structures, the first Islamic empire might in some ways be better conceived as ‘Ḥijāzī’ rather than ‘Umayyad’ or ‘Abbasid’.

Majied Robinson’s ‘From Traders to Caliphs: Prosopography, Geography and the Marriages of Muḥammad’s Tribe’ also addresses how we should conceive of the ruling elite of the early Islamic empire. He argues that the data about the marriages made by Muḥammad’s tribe of Quraysh from the mid-6th century through to the mid-8th century, as preserved in the *Kitāb Nasab Quraysh* of al-Zubayrī (d. 851), is broadly accurate and so indicative of social change in a nascent and then developed empire. He further suggests that we do not abandon the tribe as a unit of social analysis: tribes are socially constructed, of course, but like all social constructs they matter as much as any simple material or biological

reality.⁹ What the prosopographical data suggests is that the generation of Quraysh just before Muḥammad's own married exogamously (i.e. outside Quraysh) relatively frequently (over 40% of recorded marriages). However, Muḥammad's own generation married exogamously even more (more than 60% of recorded pairings). Furthermore, they married into a far wider range of tribes, from a much wider geographical area. This picture correlates with the new status achieved by the Ḥijāzī elite as the centre of a growing tribal federation and nascent empire in the 620s, 630s and 640s; Quraysh's much more local marriages in the mid-to-late-6th century would suggest a more local political significance for the tribe. Finally, Robinson also analyses the marriages of the Umayyad caliphs and their sons (mid 7th- to mid-8th century). He shows that this ruling branch of Quraysh married exogamously far less than the other cohorts; fewer than 15% of their marriages were to non-Qurashīs, suggesting, he proposes, 'an increasingly distant elite that no longer needed to marry into the leading families of the Islamic project in order to maintain their authority'.¹⁰ For all that the Umayyads were part of the wider Ḥijāzī imperial elite, being an Umayyad (or rather, being an Umayyad caliph or his son), did have consequences for relations with the wider society and thus for a sense of group identity.

Like Robinson, Hagemann also considers what the later, 9th- and 10th-century Arabic tradition can tell us about the first century of Islam, but she examines the narrative historical material recorded by al-Balādhurī (d. c. 892) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). And like Munt, Hagemann is interested in rebellion and what it can tell us. However, Hagemann is wary of drawing any positivist conclusions from her material; rather, she focuses on the ways that rebellions are

⁹ For some thought-provoking discussion of key literature on this topic, see Patricia Crone, 'The Tribe and the State', in *The State: Critical Concepts* ed. John A. Hall (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 446–9.

¹⁰ Below, ??.

presented in the later sources. In ‘Challenging Authority: al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī on Khārījism during the Reign of Mu‘āwīya b. Abī Sufyān,’ Hagemann notes that almost all the extant historical reports (*akhbār*) on the so-called Kharijite rebellions during the reign of the first Syrian Umayyad caliph, Mu‘āwīya are preserved only by al-Balādhurī or al-Ṭabarī, or both. She argues that the two scholars probably had access to similar material but made deliberate selections in order to make very different uses of the stories about the Kharjites.¹¹ Al-Balādhurī, as a courtier and man of letters, was interested in ‘ethics and morals’, as well as ‘entertaining stories’.¹² His material includes startling stories of female rebels and uses the Kharijite rebels themselves almost approvingly in order to point up the Umayyads’ moral failings. Al-Ṭabarī, as a unity-minded (*jamā‘ī*) religious scholar and student of the Muslim polity, was more concerned with ‘statecraft and communal cohesion’;¹³ he condemns the Kharijites where they are in open rebellion but is more approving of non-militant Kharijites who were persecuted for their challenges to Umayyad misconduct.¹⁴

The last two articles turn to Umayyad Spain. In “‘They fled to their remote islands’: al-Ḥakam II and *al-Majūs* in the *Muqtabas* of Ibn Ḥayyān’, Ann Christys also proposes a more sceptical and historically-contextualised reading of the sources. She notes that al-Ḥakam II’s (r. 961–976) efforts to repel Viking raids are extant only in a mid-11th-century compilation by Ibn Ḥayyān (d. 1076).

¹¹ See her comments on how al-Balādhurī appears to have been likely to have had access to materials from Abū Mikhnaḥ on the Kharjities, but to have chosen deliberately not to use them, ?? below. For some further discussion around source-criticism and the Kharijites, see Adam Gaiser, ‘Source-Critical Methodologies in Recent Scholarship on the Kharijites’, *History Compass* 7.5 (2009), 1376–90.

¹² Below, ??.

¹³ Below, ?? . For the term *jamā‘ī*, see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1974), I:278; Patricia Crone, *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 28-9.

¹⁴ As Hagemann notes, these conclusions match those arrived at by other scholars who looked at other case studies from the two compilers’ material, below ??.

Whereas historians have tended to treat this material on the Vikings (Arabic, *Majūs*; Latin, *Nordimanni*) as simple factual evidence, Christys notes that—just as al-Balādhurī’s and al-Ṭabarī’s concerns lay elsewhere than the facts of rebellion in the 7th century—Ibn Ḥayyān focuses much more on al-Ḥakam II and his court than on the Vikings themselves. The elaborate ceremonial preparations at Córdoba and Madīnat al-Zahrā’ for the annual campaigns against the raiders are described in detail; the raiders themselves and their impact scarcely figure at all. The impression is of 10th-century court propaganda descriptions of legitimating ceremonial parades preserved in the 11th-century history of Ibn Ḥayyān—himself of course a partisan of the (in fact now terminally imperilled) Umayyad cause.¹⁵

Finally, in ‘Heirs and spares: elite fathers and their sons in the literary sources of Umayyad Iberia’, Nicola Clarke considers the anxieties around dynastic continuity as depicted in the chronicles of Ibn al-Quṭīya (d. 977), Ibn al-Kardabūs (fl. 13th century) and Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. 1374), which describe events in 9th-, 10th- and 11th-century Spain. When read in the wider context of early Islamic literature on parenthood among the ruling elite, the chronicles’ message that successful lineages are founded upon diligent imitation of patriarchal example is accentuated. For example, a young ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mu‘āwiya—the future first Umayyad emir of al-Andalus—is depicted by Ibn al-Quṭīya in attendance at an audience between his grandfather, the Syrian Umayyad Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik, and Sāra, the granddaughter of a former Visigothic king of Spain. Sāra seeks Hishām’s protection and assumes the status of his ward; the young orphan ‘Abd al-Raḥmān is likewise represented as Hishām’s son in his father’s absence. In later life, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān is said to have been scrupulous in the protection

¹⁵ *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden : Brill, 1960 [i.e. 1954]-2009), ‘Ibn Ḥayyān’ (A. Huici Miranda).

offered to Sāra at Córdoba. The decline of the dynasty in the early 11th century is blamed on the failure of a son to heed his father's advice (and so also on a father's failure to educate his son properly): al-Muẓaffar, son of the Umayyads' vizier, al-Manṣūr (r. 981–1002) was profligate and arrogant, provoking a fatal civil war in the Spanish Umayyad caliphate; the contrast with Hishām's relationship with ʿrel al-Raḥmān is clear. These stories and others bring to mind the *Qābūs-nāma* of Kaykāvūs, an Iranian aristocrat of late 10th century, where the training necessary for aristocrats' children was described.

As Clarke observes in her conclusion, in the Umayyad world, as elsewhere, elite masculinity was socially constructed: 'a presumption of masculine authority within the household shaped the way ... rulers were described ... and how ... fathers related to their sons'.¹⁶ Being an Umayyad ruler was not something simply biologically determined, but rather something imagined and projected. Of course, this tension between social construction and material fact lies at the heart of all historiography but it is especially salient in the five pieces on the Umayyads and their memory that follow below. For Munt, 'attitudes' and 'negotiation' are central to the project of imperial dominion over others.¹⁷ The elite of the Ḥijāz were closely related to their rulers, whether from the Umayyad or Abbasid branch of Quraysh; the status they negotiated within the empire reflected these connections and their relative political quietism accorded with it. Robinson reminds us how such identities founded upon kinship were largely built upon marriage and reproduction, and shows that the later texts that promoted the memory and status of kin-groups can nonetheless be used to reconstruct these processes. In contrast, Hagemann and Christys focus on the contemporary concerns of our sources: the courtly and politico-theological interests of Iraqis in

¹⁶ Below, ??.

¹⁷ Below, ??.

the 9th and 10th century when they narrated resistance to past Umayyad rule, and the reiteration of past Umayyad military pomp in the very final decades of Umayyad power. Together, the articles point to an exciting future for the study of 'the first dynasty of Islam',¹⁸ in which previously marginal perspectives are regained, and new approaches provide new answers to the perennial questions of dynasty and empire.

¹⁸ The phrase is, of course, Gerald Hawting's, in his *First Dynasty of Islam*.